

Report from Foundations for Farming Trainer, Maqhawe Mthembu

On 16 and 17 March 2020 as Foundations for Farming we conducted training at the Heartfelt facility in Makapanstad. This was the sixth round of training since we started in October 2019. It has been such a great journey since we started up until the end of the official arrangement to do training for 6 months. The sense of family we have developed with the trainees and the ladies of Heartfelt is amazing. Every single visit has been special.

When we first started in October 2019 we started with various trainees. Some had done vegetable gardening before and some had never done it before, mostly due to lack of interest. In the beginning of the project there was very little faith among many that the plants would even grow at the facility. Along with the trainees we set up rotational system so that they could take turns in groups to take care of the garden in terms watering, mulching, fertilization and weeding. We are proud to say that the crops did very well. Cabbage, Onions, Spinach & Beans were harvested within 4 months since the garden was established at the first training in October. Based on the harvest the trainees evidently showed faithfulness as they worked as a team regardless of ups and downs and certain disagreements between them at times. We are also proud to note that throughout all of these trainings many of the trainees developed greater interest in vegetable gardening to the point that those who did have vegetable gardens before the training now started to grow vegetables at home. Those who already had gardens improved their standards of production. We started with 24 trainees and at the last training ended with 13. As these trainees are about 90% unemployed youth, most of them found employment during the course of the 6 months and could no longer attend or they started looking at other avenues. We are happy though to have had those who fell out eventually. Due to our emphasis on faithfulness and stewardship values we trust that through the time they were still involved in the project they grew as people and are making an impact where they are.

In February 2020 we rotated crops on the same spot, therefore starting a new cycle. This clearly indicated progress.

A great highlight is the crèche vegetable garden that the trainees established and have been taking great care of out of their own initiative. It was wonderful that children get to see the crops grow and they get to eat fresh vegetables straight from the garden. There is more space at the crèche and possibilities of truly growing the garden to provide more vegetables for the children.

At this March visit we noticed that the new cycle of crops is doing very well compared to when we first started. This is a clear sign that the soil has improved and that the principles of Conservation Agriculture we have been teaching are working. The increased faithfulness and stewardship of trainees have attributed to this. It was pleasing to arrive to a very clean plot with grass being cut and collected for compost making and mulching. There were 3 beds of 10m length made and ready for planting, indicating a desire to grow more crops. Most of the trainees have expressed a desire to eventually grow enough crops. Having learned how to produce their own compost they are also looking at possibly turning that into a business. It is wonderful that the Heartfelt ladies have also enjoyed vegetables from the initial garden. Through exposure to the garden they have indicated to have been inspired to start growing their own crops at home. In February we shared seedlings and some gardening instructions to guide them. They have come back with great testimonies of how well their small gardens are progressing. At this visit we managed to plant at the newly established beds whilst revising on what we have been teaching. We also got to establish a new compost heap, using plant material that was cut in the yard and manure that was donated by a local cattle farmer.

This visit was rather bitter sweet as it is the last of the official 6 months agreed upon. Pastor Joey & I initially arrived at this community looking to impact change and throughout the process we believe we achieved imparting skills and inspiring hope. We are proud to say that involvement in the project has grown us as well and we have learned a whole lot from those in the community we have had an opportunity to interact with. We are looking forward to discussing ways in which we can further assist the skills development of the current trainees and others in the community who want to learn. It is wonderful that of the current trainees there are those looking to take what they have learned and grow it into a business. At the end of the training we awarded attendance certificates to the trainees. They evidently appreciated this very much.